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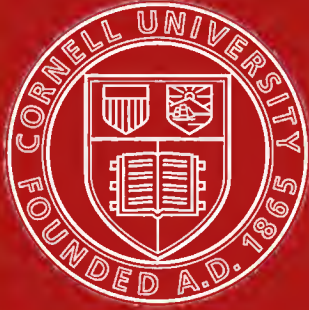


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# REMBRANDT

## SELECTED STUDIES

BY

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JOHN W. MOLLETT, AND OTHERS.



*Rembrandt f. 1653.*

THE LOUVRE AND LUXEMBOURG CO.

1319 Walnut St., Philadelphia.



REMBRANDT. 1634



REMBRANDT'S MOTHER

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## REMBRANDT

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Famous among the great Dutch masters of painting was Rembrandt van Ryn. His contemporaries in art were Murillo, of the Spanish school, and Rubens and Van Dyck, of the Flemish school. Italy had, long before this, produced Leonardi da Vinci, Michael Angelo, Raphael, Titian and Correggio. Germany, France and England had not yet entered upon the field of art with any really great names. Rembrandt lived in an era of great historical movements. Richelieu was the great power in French politics, and Cromwell had seriously disturbed the monarchical machinery of England. Rembrandt was born in Leyden, Holland, in 1607. His father, a miller, was then forty years old, and in easy circumstances. His mother was a vigorous, strong-charactered woman, whom the boy, in after years, loved to portray. His early life presents the usual struggle with difficulties and environments. He had not, like Van Dyck, the advantages of a Rubens for a teacher. In 1630, when twenty-three years old, he established himself in Amsterdam, as a professional artist. Here he spent the remainder of his days. In 1634, he married Saskia von Ulenburg, a very beautiful girl, to whom he was devotedly attached. She was of an aristocratic family, an orphan, and had a

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SASKIA

large fortune in her own name. Saskia is represented in so many portraits by her husband, that her face is familiar to all who know his works. Three pictures of her, painted during the year of their betrothal, show her in all the loveliness of youth—with dazzling complexion, rosy lips, great, expressive eyes and auburn hair. Beatrice is inseparable from Dante; Mona Lisa from Leonardo; Vittoria

Colonna from Michael Angelo; and, with Saskia, begins the brightest epoch of Rembrandt's life. She created for him the joys of domestic life, and furnished subjects for many of his most famous art compositions. Rembrandt was married when Saskia was eighteen, and his wife died at the age of thirty. At her death, she left her wealth to her husband. Misfortune overtook him in spite of his success; and, fifteen years later, in 1657, his household goods and his fine collection of paintings were sold at auction, to satisfy his creditors. He died in 1669, when he was sixty-two years old, and was buried at Westerkirk.



Rembrandt, himself a great beginning and a great ending, passed in his life-journey many another great beginning and great ending; passed, ignorant of many, unheeding of most; for so little did public events—even those of his native land, the events generally considered of importance—affect him, that it is only desirable to mention them for the purpose of realizing more distinctly his place in the history of man, of pointing out certain well-known landmarks by which to map his comet-career, and of getting him into historical perspective. In England, at the time that Rembrandt was born, Justice had but lately made an end of trying, condemning, hanging, drawing and quartering, with a little incidental torturing, the participators in the Gunpowder Plot, and was engaged in resettling the bandage on





PORTRAIT OF SASKIA

1633

her eyes, which had, it is to be feared, slipped somewhat awry in the hurry of the chase. He was two years old when Milton came into the world, ten when Shakespeare departed from it, twelve when Raleigh's restless spirit was hurried out of it. When Charles and Buckingham



were making their futile journey to the Spanish Court, he was beginning his brief period of study in Lastman's studio; and while Buckingham was sailing in pomp to his fatal attempt to relieve the Protestants beleaguered in Rochelle, he was painting his first picture.

He took his first pupil the year that Buckingham fell under Felton's knife, and had painted "The Anatomy Lesson" and "The Ship-builder and his Wife" when Milton first broke upon the world as a poet with "L'Allegro" and "Il Penseroso." In 1640, the year his mother died, the Long Parliament met; and the birth of Titus and the death of Strafford on the scaffold both befell in the following year. The birth of Newton, and the death of Saskia, took place during the next, and the same year saw Charles' ill-fated standard first flaunt upon the breeze at Nottingham. As the Civil War raged up and down the country, and Charles' affairs grew ever worse and worse, so did Rembrandt's prosperity as surely if less conspicuously, decline. The process was more swift, however, in the former than in the latter case; for Charles had lain seven years in his grave, and two years had passed since Cromwell, his conqueror, had been made Lord Protector, when Rembrandt was finally declared bankrupt. Meantime, in the previous year in fact, we come upon a link between these two contemporary giants, the great ruler and the great painter; for in that year, 1655, Cromwell granted a pension to one Manasseh ben Israel, who had successfully negotiated with him the permission for the Jews to return to England after three hundred and seventy years of banishment. Now, among the etchings by the painter is one of this same Manasseh who was his fellow-citizen in Amsterdam, and in it we can gaze upon the presentment, an excellent one, we may be sure, of the man that Cromwell honored and Rembrandt knew. Great beginnings and great endings in England. The ending of the glorious traditions of Elizabeth's England on the scaffold of Raleigh, the ending of the golden age of England's literature, when in turn Shakespeare,



Fletcher, Ben Jonson, and Massinger passed away. The beginning and the ending of the last would-be-irresponsible monarchy; the beginning and ending of the resulting Commonwealth; but the ending, actual if not yet avowed, of the divine right of kings to do unquestioned wrong, and the beginning of the freedom that comes from true constitutional government. Still greater beginnings, which have not yet come even within sight of their endings, over-seas. Rembrandt was two years old when Canada was first effectually settled and the city of Quebec founded, and, though the seizure of the young colony by England in 1629 was followed only three years later by its restoration to the French, the beginning of what is now England in America was made during his lifetime. He was four when the United States saw its first beginnings in the establishment of the colony of Virginia; fourteen, and just commencing his art studies in the studio of Van Swanenburch, when the unsuspected seeds of its future development were planted with the first steps taken by the Pilgrim Fathers on the shores of Massachusetts—seeds which had already proved their assured vitality nine years later, when the first Charter was granted; while, in the meantime another strain, destined to flourish apart awhile, then meet and mingle with the first, arose the year he finished finally with masters when New York was founded. Beginnings and endings no less great in France. Henri Quatre was still on the throne when Rembrandt was born, but was not destined to enjoy much longer that Paris he held worth a mass, for Rembrandt was but four when the gay king was murdered by Jacques Clement. He was eighteen when Richelieu rose to the power he used so ruthlessly yet so successfully for France; six-and-thirty when the reins of government dropped from his dying hands into those of the Italian Mazarin, less commanding if no less cunning; fifty-six when Mazarin followed his great predecessor to the tomb.





PORTRAIT OF AN OLD WOMAN

Amsterdam was at this time a rich and flourishing commercial city of a hundred thousand inhabitants, intersected by the River Amstel, and by numerous canals. The lofty houses of the citizens formed the streets; the mansions of the nobility lined the quays. The tapering roofs and towers of churches and public buildings rose in the midst. The architecture of Amsterdam contained, even then, a few traces of the florid Gothic style in the churches and ancient convents, and in the peaked gables, the ornamental arches, and profiles of the houses; but Hendrik de Keyser, the town architect, had



created a new national style which, though based on the Italian Renaissance, was original in its character. This architecture, with pilasters and classical plain-moulding at every story, was picturesque in its ornamental gables, its grotesque heads, its carved stone garlands, and its bonds of red brick and free-stone. Each house had a family character or emblem of its own. The facades, escutcheons, medallions and sign-boards were decorated with allegorical subjects in bas-relief, figures and scenes borrowed from the Bible, family mottoes, proverbs, rhymes, or play upon names. Perpetual bustle and crowd pervaded the streets, canals and rivers. The Y and the Amstel were

crowded with vessels. The city was trading with the whole world, and was the exchange of all nations, and the focus of civilization. Artists came there in great numbers with the double object of studying the peculiar picturesqueness of the city, and finding among its wealthy merchants a market for their works; and among them Rembrandt established his studio. He was not a stranger in the place where, six or seven years ago, he had passed his short apprenticeship with Lastman. And, even after his return to Leyden, he had not been forgotten in Amsterdam, for from that city he had received numerous commissions.



The birth of Dutch art and of Dutch freedom were contemporaneous. Holland emerged from the long and cruel thraldom of the oppressor to freedom of action and freedom of thought. It cast off the religion of its task-masters, and the same religious revolution which created a political Holland created also Dutch art. The religion of the pictures of this school, when there is any, is that of a bald





Protestantism which makes their sacred scenes as unlovely as the religious services where Protestantism has sway. The Bible is interpreted in Dutch art not by the Church, but by the people, and the simplicity of Scripture is exaggerated to triviality. In their choice of subject the Dutch masters stand out in sharp contrast to the painters of Italy. The Italians take us into the seventh Heaven, and show us lovely visions of saints and angels, flooded with a golden radiance from on high; the Dutchmen teach us to find an idyl in a broomstick, or a paradise in a tavern parlour. To their eyes a girl peeling onions is a worthier subject than a gloried Madonna; and if they paint sacred

pictures, the Dutch Burgomaster and the homely *Vrouw* peep out from the thin disguise of a Holy Family. The Dutch school is the exponent of every-day life; it has no aspirations after the great and glorious, the mysterious or the unseen. Nature, as seen in Holland, either out of doors or in the house, is the one inspiration of its art. We have come to the domain of naturalism, and have left spiritualism in Italy; just as we have exchanged the blue skies of the South for the leaden, cloudy atmosphere of the North. We must not suppose, however, that the Dutch school in its realistic character presents nothing but a brutal materialism, and never rises above the delineation of drunken boozers at a village inn. There is a *truthfulness* in the Dutch pictures which commands admiration; a dead tree by Ruisdael may touch a heart, a bull by Paulus Potter may speak eloquently, a kitchen by Kalf may contain a poem. All the painters of this school confined themselves to loving, understanding and representing nature, every one adding his own feelings and tastes—in fact, adding *himself*. This love of nature is specially shown in those landscapes and sea-



pieces in which the Dutch school excels. If we visit various parts of Holland in different kinds of weather, we shall see how each painter identifies *himself* with the special aspect which he depicts. A barren, gloomy landscape under a leaden sky, unrelieved by living creature, its grim monotony only broken by a waterfall or a dead tree, at once shows us Jacob van Ruisdael, "the melancholy Jacques" of landscape painters who finds "tongues in



PORTRAIT CALLED SOBIESKI



PORTRAIT OF SASKIA



trees, books in the running brooks, sermons in stones." A bright early morning, when the sun flashes merrily on white sail and glancing streams, and the fat cattle are browsing knee-deep in the rich meadows, reminds us of the lover of light, Aelbert Cuyp. A warm afternoon, when the shadows of the fruit-trees lie across the orchard, and an ox, or horse, or some other animal, lies in the graceful shade, tells us of Paulus Potter, the Raphael of animal painters, the La Fontaine of

artists. The every-day life of Holland is identified in its various phases with different painters of this school. Owing to the changes which time and fashion make, we shall not find in the streets of Antwerp the "Night Watch" of Rembrandt, or the "Banquet" of Van der Helst in the town-hall; the long satin robes of Ter Borch; the plumed cavaliers of Wouwerman; or the drunken peasants of Adriaan van Ostade. But if in passing through a Dutch town, we see a young girl leaning over the old balustrades of a window surrounded with ivy and geraniums, we may still recognize Gerard Dou. In the peaceful interior of a Gothic house, where an old woman is spinning, and which is lighted up by the warm rays of the sun, we see Pieter de Hooch. The canal bordered with trees, in a clean town, ever wearing a holiday appearance, where every stone in the streets may be counted, as well as every tile on the roof and every brick in the walls, reminds us of Van der Heyde; and the vegetable garden at Amsterdam still testifies to the fidelity of Metsu. We have seen, then, that the origin of the Dutch school is to be traced to that epoch when Holland successfully waged the war of Independence, and threw off the yoke of Spain. We have seen that the religion of the school



THE NIGHT WATCH



is that of a marked Protestantism, and that in its choice of subjects, Nature stands first, especially the homelier side of nature in everyday life. We may notice, too, that nearly every master of this school stands by himself, delineating nature in his own special way. One word must be said on the *colouring* of the Dutch masters. We frequently find a brilliance of colour in their pictures which we should scarcely expect under the gloomy skies of Holland. The secret is to be found in the double existence of Holland, European and Oriental. Cold and grey as its own skies may be, it possessed bright lands amongst colonies in the tropics; and many a Dutch master, as he saw the ships come home laden with the treasures of the East, dreamed of the sun of Java, whilst he saw only the grey shadows of Holland. We have said that the Dutch school contained all its greatest masters within the space of less than a century. That school sprung into vigorous life, full grown as it were, at once, without preparation, and died as quickly.

Painters of things seen in the life, rather than in the imagination,

it follows that the education of the Dutch masters must have made them keen students of fact. The model was directly before them, and they could not get away from the actual pictorial appearance. So, by force of habit and training, they became observers, rather than poetic thinkers—men of trained eyes, quick to see every line, light and color; men of trained hands, who could record exactly what they saw with certainty; but not men of great romantic or imaginative disposition. They have been put down in art history as







“realists,” though the word is misleading. No painter can do more than “realize” his impression of the facts before him; and the Dutch simply possessed a very clear-cut knowledge of the facts. The impression was just as vivid when they turned from painting their men to painting their streets, taverns, domestic scenes, landscapes and cattle. In reality, they were painting the portrait again—the portrait of Holland; and they did it with the same shrewd observation, exact skill and artistic taste. It was all a home art—as local almost as that of Japan; reflecting the time, the place and the people; speaking for Holland and the Dutch; but not, as a rule, carrying far beyond that. There

was only one world-embracing painter among them all; and that one was Rembrandt. The reason for excepting him from the rule is obvious enough. Rembrandt was not only an eye and a hand, but a mind and a spirit. It was his intense sympathy, his broad humanity, that made him universal and carried his art beyond the dikes and dunes.



To-day his works appeal to all manner of men, because they play upon those passions and emotions common to the whole human race. It made little difference that he painted the wretched outcast and the squalid Jew, in a small town, in a small country. The human heart is substantially the same in all countries; and, out of the Nazareth

of Amsterdam, came Rembrandt's gospel of pity and passion, to find believers in every land and among every people. His humanity places him in a class with Titian and Shakespeare.

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It is worth while to repeat the statement that Rembrandt was a mind as well as an eye. Few painters had a keener grasp on actualities; few saw the world without so positively and so clearly. Yet the artist's view is always tinged by an individuality; and everything in nature, to Rembrandt, was "seen through the prism of an emotion." The mental make-up of the man is seen in all his works; and, as he lived through the years of his life, we can see the deepening and broadening of his character in his pictures. At first he had something of gay youth about him. He had surrounded himself with studio costumes, oriental dresses, turbans, armor, chains, jewelry; and he used to dress in these and paint himself from a mirror. Many of these youthful portraits in silk or armor, with a defiant smile and a swaggering air, are to-day in European galleries. At the same time he was painting other portraits of the hale "Gilder" type; painting nude Europas and Proserpines, holy families and other Biblical subjects. Saskia was his wife; and he was dressing her in bright costumes and painting pictures from her. At Cassel she is gorgeous in robe and



THE ANATOMY LESSON



Rembrandt



PORTRAIT OF A MAN



hat, very quiet, dignified, quite noble ; at Dresden she is seated, smiling, upon Rembrandt's knee, while he is holding up a glass of beer and laughing boisterously. This was his time of success, and his laughter was not out of place ; but already he was in sympathy with the sterner and sadder side of life. He had heard the cry of the people from the street and the quarter, and he was socially interested in the forlorn and the miserable.

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The works of Rembrandt are so numerous and so important that we cannot speak justly of them in our present space. His pictures number about six hundred, and his engravings four hundred ; and these include not only many subjects, but many variations of these subjects. The chief picture of his earliest style is the "Anatomical Lecture," now in the Gallery of the Hague. This is remarkable for the splendid heads of the Professor and his pupils, and for the foreshortening of the body of the dead man which is the subject of the lecture. In 1642 Rembrandt painted his largest picture, which is also considered as his chief work. It is called the "Night Watch," and is in the Amsterdam Museum. It represents a company of guardsmen and others issuing from a public building into a space where there are many officers, soldiers, musicians, young girls, and other figures, the great standard of the city being in the foreground. One feels that the portraits of all the principal persons must be good. The color is splendid, and the blending of lights and shades is marvelous in its beauty. He painted other pictures, in which there were numbers of portraits of burghers, or men who were connected with important institutions and undertakings. Rembrandt painted but few pictures from profane history, and his landscapes are rare, but the few that exist are worthy of so great a master, of one who so loved everything that God has spread out before us in Nature. His scenes



from common life are beyond criticism ; but sometimes his picturing of repulsive things makes us turn away, though we must admire the power with which they are painted. His portraits were of the highest order, and very numerous ; no other artist ever made so many portraits of himself, and in them he is seen from the days of youthful hope to ripened age.

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Whenever Rembrandt was a little uncertain of his method he seems to have sat himself down and settled the matter by the experiment of painting a fresh portrait of himself, a sitter who was always at hand and in an amiable mood whenever the master desired such a *seance*. These series of portraits, scattered over different periods,



form a most interesting statement of his history, his prosperity or his reverses, which are pretty plainly inscribed therein; while no doubt they served a useful purpose to Rembrandt in his craft and stock, and afforded posterity an example of industry and good sense, which it were well for conventional folk not too far to interfere with by assuming ever that any painter who dares to record more than one portrait of him or herself must be an individual of extraordinary vanity.

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Rembrandt excelled alike in every style, and treated, with equal felicity, the noblest subjects,—such as “Christ healing the Sick”—and the most homely scenes, such as a cook tossing her cakes in a pan. His works are principally remarkable for their picturesque effect and truth to nature. He combined the greatest freedom and grace of execution with thorough knowledge of all the technical processes alike of painting, engraving and etching. The effects of light and shade in his etchings have never been surpassed; and he has justly been called the Dutch Correggio. His landscapes and sea pieces



are vividly faithful representations of the inhospitable North, with its dull level stretch of ocean and dreary shores; whilst his interiors give life-like glimpses of the domestic life of the home-loving Dutch people. The want of feeling for refined physical beauty with which he, in common with all his countrymen, has been charged, is perhaps to some extent to be accounted for by his intense sympathy with the people with whom he was brought in contact—a sympathy which enabled him to catch and fix a likeness on canvas or on



REMBRANDT'S FATHER

copper with an extraordinary insight into character. That he was not, however, without the power of appreciating spiritual elevation of sentiment is proved by the pathos of some of the heads in his "Descent from the Cross," in the Pinakothek, Munich, and in a similar subject in the National Gallery.

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A word must be said about the world-famed "Night Watch," one of the masterpieces of all time, and Rembrandt's greatest achievement. It is pretty evident that the accomplished master put all he knew into this canvas, by way of composition in line and mass, whilst he shows a determination to secure the most powerful dramatic effect that could be attained through his consummate disposal of chiaroscuro,



which assists his introduction of contrasted type, age and character. The first impression that this work makes on the spectator is to astound and almost stupify him by its very power and intensity, but, after standing before it for a quarter of an hour or so, it begins to reveal itself as at all events a human possibility of a great painter's creative genius. One can at length begin to observe that though the whole impression rendered is, from its grip of the various truths recorded, one of irresistible conviction, yet that every square foot of the

enormous canvas has been most carefully reasoned out in the matter of logical and subtle composition. The construction has been built out from the three front central figures, though all is focused towards the one true centre—the bold and defiant cavalier with his outstretched hand and glove. Every passage is made secondary to this main motive, and every line and varying degree of contrast in the matter of light and shade is steadily leading up to this climax. Observe the ingenious system of perspective and depth which is



PORTRAIT CALLED COPPENOL

imparted to the composition by the varied disposition of spears and guns, and how the motive of line is repeated in the extreme left corner by the action of the dwarf which echoes an intention in the gloom of shadow without a commonplace repetition, whilst the drum of the man on the extreme right has obviously been invented in the necessity of mere composition, and to secure a precious morsel of repose which should contain the required disposition of contour. The dazzling child in full light is essential to secure the general focus of the canvas, but adds by force of contrast amid such a company, to the



dramatic intensity of the scene, whilst the man in the high black hat, behind the central group, imparts a grim humour, which relieves the tension of the threatening and awe-inspiring mood of the canvas. Without having visited Dresden, the only other works of the same size or importance that summon themselves to the memory to compare in the matter of logically reasoned and effective composition, are Leonardo de Vinci's "Last Supper," at Milan, and the "Marriage of Cana," by Tintoretto, at Venice.

When did the young Rembrandt begin to etch? Who first taught him to thump out the beeswax into a sufficiently thin and even coating upon the warm copper plate; to blacken it in the dense smoke of the torch, and then to guide the needle as each touch brought out the clear-cut line of warm gold upon the dark ground, impressing on him that, in the result he aimed at, that which was then brightest would be darkest, that which was then blackest would be white? When did he first hang over the bath of acid, turning slowly emerald green as it sucked up the copper, while he brushed away with a feather the silvery bubbles as they budded along the lines his needle had drawn, checking the biting and endangering the ground? When did he,

once for all, feel the rapture that comes from the first proof of one's first etching—a rapture such as never again occurs in its entirety; since, bad as it may appear to the eye of broader experience, for the maker of it there floats over it, as it lies yet warm and damp from the press, a glamour such as no finished masterpiece shall ever again give rise to in the future? We can picture the scene; but we can give



THE THREE ORIENTALS

neither date nor place on and in which it took place. That it was somewhere in Leyden we may safely assume; that it must have been later than 1620 we may feel fairly sure; that it was not later than 1628 we know; for we have one notable etching, if not two, signed by him in that year—the first we know of, though it is difficult to believe that they were the first fruits of his practice in the art. There is an ease and certainty in the touch, a delicacy and finish in the execution,

an appreciation already of the possibilities and limitations of the process, which, marvelous as he was in all things artistic, seem hardly credible in a first effort, even of his. Yet the little evidence that we possess appears to indicate that it was his first. As far as possibilities go, there is no reason why Rembrandt should not have taken up etching as soon as he had attained sufficient mastery of drawing to express himself at all. The art of engraving, now almost extinct, was at that time in great demand for the production of portraits, the illustration of books and the reproduction of popular pictures; and there was quite a prosperous little group of professors of it in Leyden.











